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# THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART.

BY LEILA MECHLIN.

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ONLY a little over a year ago announcement was made that America had a National Gallery of Art; one which for more than half a century had legally existed, but had been overlooked and forgotten. Once brought to light through the agency of the Harriet Lane Johnston bequest, this institution has demonstrated splendid vigor and developed with a rapidity as encouraging as it is surprising.

When the Smithsonian Institution was established, by act of Congress, in 1846, it was made the lawful custodian of all works of art belonging to the nation, and steps were taken, by the regents, to procure and maintain a gallery. Various conferences were held upon the subject; plans for special exhibitions and for a school were considered; and, in 1849, with excellent judgment, the sum of four thousand dollars was expended for the purchase of the Marsh collection of prints. But that is about as far as the matter was carried.

The first equestrian statue erected in this country—that of General Jackson in Lafayette Square in the city of Washington—was not completed until 1853, and the sculptor—Clark Mills—had never seen an equestrian statue when he produced it. There were no notable collections of works of art, either public or private, available to the student; and the early painters of eminence had passed away, leaving but a scattered few to carry on the traditions. The astute collector might, at that time, have procured great art treasures in Europe, which would have incalculably enriched the nation and benefited future generations; but the astute collector was wanting, and the few purchases which were made for the National Gallery by the Smithsonian Institution were expressive chiefly of crude patriotism—pictures

which had subjective interest as records of historical personages or events, but little or no intrinsic art value. Very naturally, the interest waned, and between the years 1866 and 1879 all those things which had come into the possession of the Institution were deposited either in the Library of Congress, or in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, then lately established.

It was not strange, therefore, that when Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston made her will, disposing of her collection of paintings, historical documents and so forth, she was in ignorance of the existence of a National Gallery, and so bequeathed them to the Corcoran Gallery, with the provision that, if such an institution should at any time be established by the United States, they should revert to it. Owing to certain other conditions with which it was impossible to comply, the Corcoran Gallery was obliged to decline the bequest.

It was this emergency which led President Roosevelt to include in his annual message to Congress, in December, 1904, the recommendation that "the collections of art contemplated in Section 5,586 of the Revised Statutes should be designated and established as a national gallery of art, and the Smithsonian Institution should be authorized to accept any additions to said collections that may be received by gift, bequest or devise"; and it was this, also, which opened the way to the discovery of the mislaid institution.

Mrs. Johnston's heirs were as averse to the dispersal of her collection as was the nation, but they had no legal right to interpret her will. Hence an amicable suit was entered in the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, and the quandary was settled on July 11th, 1906, by a decree which not only authorized the Smithsonian Institution to receive the gift, but gave legal standing to a National Gallery. In less than a month, the works of art, etc., composing the Harriet Lane Johnston collection were given into the custody of the Smithsonian Institution and temporarily placed on exhibition in the rooms set aside for the Secretary and regents.

Mrs. Johnston died in July, 1903; and, while the settlement of her estate was pending, Mr. Charles L. Freer, of Detroit, Michigan, made his splendid gift to the nation, placing in the hands of the regents of the Smithsonian Institution, on May 6th, 1906, a deed to his private collection of paintings, prints,

potteries and other art objects, valued at \$600,000, and promising to bequeath to the Institution the sum of \$500,000 for the construction of a fire-proof building in which to house it. This had no reference to a National Gallery, but it is probable, if not certain, that the discussions occasioned by Mr. Freer's original offer operated toward an awakening of interest on the part of those in authority and helped materially to quicken the solicitations of those outside. And in the end, though the Freer collection will be in a separate building, a unit in itself, it will not be isolated to such an extent that it may not be considered a part of the National Gallery. It was, in fact, the beginning; the first stride toward a distant goal. That Mr. Freer recognized the desirability of centralizing, at Washington, the forces which make for national culture is significant.

The American people are inherently generous. The majority of our public institutions are supported by private individuals, and even our Government collections have been built up by numerous small private gifts. No sooner, indeed, was it known that a National Gallery existed than offers were made of loans and gifts. But the first question to be met was that of adequate accommodations—a suitable gallery in which to house and place on exhibition the newly acquired works. Every available foot of space in both the Smithsonian and National Museum buildings was occupied, the cellars were full, the storehouses were overflowing, and the new building, with its nine and a half acres of floor space for the accommodation of exhibits, was far from completed. The Smithsonian Hall might well have answered, could it have been remodelled and made available, but there was no place in which to dispose its exhibits, and hence the lecture-hall of the National Museum was selected. This is a large and dignified room, and, under the expert direction of Mr. William H. Holmes, chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology, who has acted as curator of the National Gallery, it was redecorated and adapted to gallery use. To be sure, it is poorly lit and in other respects far from ideal; but it alone was available, and its prompt utilization manifested on the part of the officers of the Smithsonian Institution a fixed determination not to allow the National Gallery project again to lapse.

Almost immediately after the Harriet Lane Johnston collection was arranged in this hall, the heirs of the late Lucius Tuckerman

offered to loan to the gallery, for not less than a year, the collection of paintings which he had assembled; and, shortly after this, Mr. Edward Kemeys, the distinguished animal sculptor, who died only last May, placed indefinitely at the disposal of the National Gallery, for exhibition purposes, a collection of his bronzes and original plaster casts, numbering more than fifty.

The Harriet Lane Johnston collection comprises sixteen paintings and as many other items, some of which have no special bearing upon the subject of art; such, for instance, as an autograph letter of Queen Victoria addressed to Mrs. Johnston's uncle, President Buchanan, during his term of office. The paintings are chiefly portraits. There is a likeness of "Miss Kirkpatrick," by Romney; one of "Mrs. Abington," by Hoppner; and one of "Mrs. Hammond," by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Sir Thomas Lawrence is represented by a painting of Lady Essex as "Juliet," and Sir William Beechey by a moderate-sized portrait of "Miss Murray." There is reason to believe that all are authentic, but none save the Romney is a specially important example. Aside from authorship, however, much interest attaches to a portrait of "Josepha Boegart," attributed to Pourbus, the younger, and to a painting of a "Madonna and Child," ascribed to Bernardine Luini. And, despite some blunt errors, a three-quarter-length portrait of King Edward VII, painted by Sir John Watson Gordon when, as Prince of Wales, His Majesty visited the United States, is one of the notable items in the catalogue. With, I think, but two exceptions—"A Street in India," by Edwin Lord Weeks, and "The Prince of Wales's visit to Mount Vernon," by Thomas R. Rossiter,—all the paintings in this collection are by foreign artists, so that, as a whole, it emphasizes especially the desirability of collecting this class of work; of bringing to America, and congregating in a national collection, the great works of the leading masters of all lands and times as examples and standards.

The Tuckerman loan collection was of the same type, covering merely a later period and indicating the trend of European art when, for a number of years, it usurped the rôle of the writer and devoted itself to narration, carrying at the same time the painter's craftsmanship to remarkable perfection.

It was, therefore, all the more interesting and important that the next addition to the National Gallery should have been the Kemeys collection, which turned the attention abruptly to Ameri-

can production and a diverse form of expression. Howsoever Mr. Kemeys's work may be regarded from the strict art standpoint, its strong, frank merit can never be denied, and for all time it must be reckoned among notable accomplishments. It breathes the spirit of genuine Americanism; it presents the wild life of the plains and reechoes the legend of the wilderness. While others were seeking classical ideals in the Old World, he was learning the secrets of the New, and with the true sculptor's instinct for plastic form was sympathetically interpreting the fauna of our land. When, a few years ago, an exhibition of American water-colors was held in London, an English critic declared, with evident disappointment, that none, save an Indian picture by Irving Couse, manifested "a truly American characteristic." Needless to say, this is not the kind of Americanism to which I make reference. We have pictures of Indians and cowboys galore, paintings of negroes and sky-scrappers in abundance, but we have few sincere interpretations of every-day themes which set forth the ideals, the potentialities and the hopes of our own great nation. For this reason Mr. Kemeys's work is the more significant, and the loan of so comprehensive a collection of it to the National Gallery so soon after its inception must be regarded as a felicitous circumstance.

But a great impetus was given to the new institution through another notable gift. In March, of the present year, Mr. William T. Evans, of New York, than whom none has done more to advance and encourage American art, went to Washington and offered to present to the National Gallery a collection of paintings by American artists of established reputation—an offer which was promptly and gratefully accepted. This collection consisted of fifty pictures, and was given with the understanding that if, later on, it was found that any of the number failed to uphold a properly high standard it should be replaced by a better example, in order that not only the collection itself but the representation should be as good as possible. Nothing, it would seem, could be more fair-minded or generous, and certainly no small collection could better stand for contemporary American painting. It is not faultless or complete, but it is a nucleus, and such an one as, in all probability, could have been acquired by the nation in no other way. There are, for instance, included in this collection, paintings by Inness, Wyant and Homer

Martin, which are now almost unobtainable, to say nothing of works by John LaFarge, Winslow Homer, Robert Blum and John H. Twachtman. Both the landscape and figure painters are represented, but the former with greater strength and comprehensiveness than the latter. Benjamin Constant said that Inness was the greatest landscape painter of his day; and, whether the statement may be taken at its face value or not, it is undoubtedly true that he and his contemporaries led the way to the noblest conception of landscape art that the world has ever known. Where, indeed, can we turn for truer or more sympathetic interpretations of the outdoor world than to the works of our modern American painters? They have not all seen it in the same way, nor interpreted it in the same manner; some are not poets or even good painters, but the majority of them are sincere and have independent conviction.

In the Evans National Gallery collection, which for lack of available space has been temporarily loaned to the Corcoran Gallery, there are landscapes by D. W. Tryon, J. Francis Murphy, Charles B. Davis, Henry Ranger, Charles Melville Dewey, Louis Paul Dessar, Ballard Williams and Albert Blakelock, J. Alden Weir and Robert Minor, as well as by the older men already mentioned. And, of the figure painters included in the catalogue, there are John W. Alexander, T. W. Dewing, John LaFarge, Walter Shirlaw, Louis Loeb, Sargeant Kendall, Charles C. Curran, J. Alden Weir and William T. Smedley—some of the strongest and best. From first to last, the collection has been well assembled and with a view to set forth not merely notable examples, but the work of those who have contributed something individually to the art of our land.

It has been said that we have no American school of art, but if this be so it is because we have many. In America art is passing through a formative period, and is to some extent experimental and immature; but, in spite of this, it is to-day the healthiest, most vigorous and promising art in the world. There are dangers and hindrances attending its development; feebleness in some of its members; occasional dissensions within; but the trend is onward and upward, the major tendencies being hopeful. Not merely patriotism, but common sense, therefore, dictates its encouragement, and applauds its inclusion in the permanent collection of the National Gallery. It was this belief which prompted Mr.

Evans's gift and has since induced others to make similar single contributions.

Thus it will be seen that, within a year, much has been done toward placing a National Gallery on a sure footing, but done, it will be noted, by private individuals. At no time, and in no definite way, has the Federal Government given official recognition to American art. Perhaps, in fact, I should say, to art, without qualification, for while appropriations have been made by Congress, from time to time, for the purchase of some single specific work, nothing is done toward the support of institutions, and rarely is encouragement lent by the employment of expert skill. The nearest approach to a token of any patronage of art given by the Government are the mural decorations in the Library of Congress, which were paid for out of a surplus appropriation at the minimum rate, but have, it must be confessed, exerted a potent and wide-spread influence.

America has a tremendous problem on her hands—that of social adjustment—and in no way can she solve it save through the medium of education. Until men and women learn to find pleasure in better things than mere money-getting, there will be no solution of labor troubles. Art which delights the eye and gratifies the senses is, therefore, not a luxury, but a necessity—a staff of every-day life. The public schools, through their art courses, are now doing much toward broadening visions, opening the children's eyes to that which is beautiful, cultivating their taste and giving them true standards. The museums also are reaching out in the same direction; and for the extension of art knowledge many organizations have been formed in all parts of the country. Not only, then, are the artists worthy of support, but the people are prepared to profit by the instruction which may be offered.

Governmental wheels turn slowly, but sometimes it is well that this is the case. Certainly, much care and thought must be given to the development of a National Art collection if it be made in every respect worthy. Together with the generous giver come those who have wares to sell, and discrimination must accompany the exercise of the purchase power. That this power may be unpolitical is demonstrated by the Library of Congress, which is now an independent institution and truly national in scope. Eighty years were required to evolve it, but



it is now one of the strongest factors in the nation's educational scheme, and its organization and administration illustrate the manner in which a National Gallery might be controlled and made effectual.

When the establishment of a National Gallery was first noised abroad, suggestions were made in many quarters concerning its probable character. Some persons thought that it should be restricted to American work, others that it should be exclusively a portrait gallery. The hope is, of course, that it may in time be all-inclusive, and embrace not only one, but every phase of the art of this and other lands. The suggestion that it should be a portrait gallery forming a pictorial directory of the great men of America strikes terror, however, to those interested in the success of the project who are acquainted with the official portrait galleries which are now included in every Government Department. Every Cabinet officer is represented in his Department by a portrait, painted by any artist whom his successor may select, and paid for by the nation. Some of these portraits, by chance, are good, and could fittingly be included in a National Art collection, but many are far from commendable or suitable for the purpose.

It has been said that the National Gallery would have to contend with the jealousies of other art institutions; but I believe that this supposition is incorrect and that, almost without exception, it will be found that the people in all sections are working for the common good. Certainly, when Mr. Evans's gift was announced, congratulations poured in not from individuals alone, but from sister institutions. The conviction that Washington should be the centre of national culture and learning is gaining ascendancy. Much enthusiasm has been manifested in regard to the Park Commissioner's plans for the artistic development of the city, and more and more, as time passes, is evidence given of interest in their fulfilment. The Carnegie Institution, the American Institution of Architects and the American Academy at Rome, all have their headquarters there; and, with the Library of Congress, and the scientific bureaus of the Government, they are attracting to the National Capital students and scholars from all parts of the world. And, what is more, Washington is a residential rather than a commercial city; its environment is already artistic and its future character assured.

In the Corcoran Gallery, last winter, a notable exhibition of contemporary American paintings was held—the best probably which has yet been set forth—and during the four weeks it was open it was visited by over sixty-two thousand persons. The average attendance at the Corcoran Gallery has been about four hundred thousand a year; but, upon special occasions, as many as five thousand have been admitted in an afternoon. This at least suggests the fallowness of the field.

“Why,” it has been asked, “with the Corcoran Gallery, is there need for a National Gallery?” Because, the answer is, the Corcoran Gallery is a privately endowed institution, with an independent organization and comparatively limited means. Established and endowed by the late William Wilson Corcoran, it is governed by a board of trustees whose term of office is for life and who are obliged to perpetuate; by elections, their own number. The Corcoran Gallery has, however, stood in the place of a National Gallery for many years, and if eventually, by some arrangement, it can be made a part of the larger organization, keeping its own independence, it will indeed be well.

That is, of course, looking far ahead. For the present, no radical or definite plans have been made. That other broad-minded art patrons and collectors will follow, in time, the example of both Mr. Freer and Mr. Evans seems more than probable, and that artists themselves will aid in the upbuilding of the collections there is reason to believe. The National Museum has already certain collections of ceramics and exhibits in the industrial arts, which may be reckoned as a part of the National Gallery, and it is earnestly hoped that in the near future further development may be made along these lines.

The great and first need is a building—one which will adequately and appropriately afford a home for the institution, and allow in its plan for continued growth. Undoubtedly, an appropriation for this purpose will be asked of Congress at its next session; and, though it is possible that, in pursuance of what has been characterized as its “extravagant policy of economy,” the request may be refused, it would seem more logical to believe that, with evidence of so much outside interest and enthusiasm, the national support will be forthcoming.

LEILA MECHLIN.